

A Seemingly Undetectable Threat

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# HOMEGROWN VIOLENT EXTREMISTS: A SEEMINGLY UNDETECTABLE THREAT

## **Executive Summary**

With today's unlimited and instantaneous communication, it is easy for a United States citizen to easily connect with anyone in the world. There are many positives to this; however, the unintended consequences include vulnerable people being influenced by radical ideologies. This is evident with the increase in homegrown violent extremists (HVE). The National Counterterrorism Center states that HVEs are defined by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and Department of Homeland Security (DHS) as,

...a person of any citizenship who has lived and/or operated primarily in the U.S. or its territories who advocates, is engaged in ideologically motivated terrorist activities (including providing support to terrorism) in furtherance of political or social objectives promoted by a foreign terrorist organization, but is acting independently of direction by a foreign terrorist organization (National Counter Terrorism Center, 2015).

These HVE's and their associated attacks offer a difficult challenge for law enforcement intelligence activities. Historically, terrorist organizations such as Al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), have orchestrated magnificent attacks involving months or years of planning such as massive bombings and the World Trade Center attacks. However, recently with the development of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), these groups have started calling for single factor lone wolf attacks carried out by followers within the Continental United States (CONUS). These attacks require little to no planning and minimal equipment preparation which makes it difficult for law enforcement to identify pre-attack indicators. HVE attacks do not necessarily require coordination of travel or to acquire explosives or other logistical opportunities that law enforcement can use to identify potential terrorist collaboration.

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## **Background Information**

There are different motivating factors that drive individuals to, in many cases, die for a cause while taking innocent lives of people around them. These factors, as seen in recent events, can include extremist ideologies of religion, race, anti-government sentiment or anti-abortion (pro-life) views. However, HVEs as defined above are directed or influenced by foreign terrorist organizations and this typically involves an extreme interpretation of religion. HVEs can follow any of the known behavior models that lead to violence including social-identity theory, gang model of criminal behavior, causation model of juvenile delinquency and the risk model (National Counter Terrorism Center (NCTC), 2015, p. vi). However, the threat of HVEs is dynamic and there is no linear development into violent extremism as these behaviors are affected by numerous stimuli where the totality of the environments leads to the use of violence. This presents an incredible challenge to law enforcement to identify, locate and neutralize the threat prior to the use of violence towards the public. According to Germain Difo at the American Security Project, “Extremist messaging that capitalizes on feelings of disaffection and alienation has resonated with more Americans in recent years” (Difo, 2010). Groups such as AQAP and ISIL have aggressively seized on these feelings and employ communication strategies that included social media utilization and regular professional publications like Inspire Magazine. Groups such as these promote a hatred of the United States and have increasingly advocated for the use of lone wolf attacks by US citizens. These attacks pose difficult challenges for law enforcement due to their lack of predictive modeling and few observable pre-attack indicators.

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### **Threat Analysis**

Recent trends in HVE attacks indicate that HVEs are no longer planning strategic hits on symbolic targets that require months of training or preparation. Instead, they are selecting high casualty, soft targets that are nearly impossible to fully protect. These targets could include schools, malls, critical infrastructure facilities with little protection or even nightclubs as we saw in the Orlando shooting. These attacks are extremely hard to identify prior to the attack commencing and at that point, it's the law enforcement officers working the streets that are tasked with bringing the attack to an end. From the time of the 9/11 attacks until January, 2013, four successful terrorist attacks occurred. These attackers included Nidal Hasan (2009 Fort Hood Shooting), Abdulhakim Muhammad (2009 Little Rock military recruiting office shooting), Hasan Akbar (grenade attack at Kuwaiti military base, and Mohammed Taheri-Azar (vehicle attack on the University of North Carolina). All four successful attacks were carried out by lone wolf attackers (Bjelopera, 2013). Several methods of attack have been used recently but the most common include using improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and active shooter tactics.

While both IEDs and active shooter tactics have advantages to the HVE, active shooter tactics are becoming the norm due to the independent and minimal planning that is needed to carry out an attack. Purchasing a firearm legally, training with that firearm and using it in a lawful manner is consistent with millions of Americans exercising their second amendment right. These similarities are hard to differentiate until a violent action is carried out. When lone wolf active shooter tactics are used, the techniques used to identify HVEs are greatly hindered. For this reason, it is imperative to rely on public reporting as family members and friends will have the most opportunity to identify suspicious behavior. HVEs using active shooter tactics are most vulnerable to show signs of suspicious behavior when they are carrying out pre-operational planning.

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Although these offenders are harder to detect, law enforcement and national security intelligence have been “catching the signs” that extremism is taking place. Prior to the Nadal Hasan shooting in 2009, Hasan showed up on the FBI’s radar. “Major Hasan came to the attention of the FBI in December 2008 as part of an unrelated investigation being conducted by one of our Joint Terrorism Task Forces (JTTFs)” (FBI, 2009). Prior to the Pulse Nightclub shooting in Orlando, Omar Mateen was investigated by law enforcement and the case was closed after it was decided that Mateen was not a threat. He later went on to carry out the worst mass shooting in United States history (Wilber, 2016). Another successful lone wolf attack. Although both of these cases were successful HVE attacks, it indicates that law enforcement can identify these individuals prior to the commission of an attack. The challenge for law enforcement is how to work with constitutional constraints that require a criminal predicate to be present in order to allow intelligence teams to continue collecting information in a permanent file.

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### Outlook

Recent events continue to support the notion that HVEs will continue to create problems for law enforcement and national security agencies in the future. With an ongoing war in Syria, the US assisting the Iraqi military to retake cities held by ISIS, and growing political tensions following a contentious election, the recipe for radicalization is elevated at the current time. For this reason, HVEs are currently ranked by this assessment as a high-level threat, with medium probability; however, this assessment is made with low confidence on the basis of only having access to recent HVE incidents that have been made public and an unclassified awareness of the HVE situation. According to the FBI (2015),

**High-level threat** refers to ideologically-inspired criminal activity emanating from a domestic extremist movement with the potential to cause lethal violence or economic loss in excess of \$1 million.

**Low Confidence** generally means the information's credibility or plausibility is questionable, the information is too fragmented or poorly corroborated to make solid analytic inference or significant concerns or problems exist with respect to the sources.

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## **Recommendations**

Due to the complexity of this threat, it is imperative that law enforcement agencies adapt a multifaceted approach to address this problem. Ideally, an approach would address the following:

1. Deter – Adapt a counter violent extremist (CVE) policy by:
  - Providing education and awareness to involve individuals and encourage them to become stakeholders in their communities.
  - Educate and encourage individuals to report suspicious behavior.
  - Use social media to dominate violent extremist ideology while encouraging American values.
  - Aggressively promote public and private partnerships to enhance law enforcement capabilities throughout the United States.
2. Detect – Through suspicious incident reporting and other means, identify individuals who are progressing through the radicalization process. Suspicious behavior could include:
  - Propagating and glorifying acts of violent extremism.
  - Communicating with foreign or local extremists.
  - Apologetic behavior for those that use violence as a means to promote religious or spiritual beliefs.
  - Purchasing and/or amassing chemicals used to make explosives.
  - Suspicious weapons transactions.
3. Disrupt – If criminal activity is identified, monitor and track the involved individuals.  
  
Ensure collection of pertinent information happens in a lawful way and develop intelligence to gain more knowledge and a better understanding of how these individuals

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are operating. Identify tactics, techniques and procedures (TTPs) that the individual or group might be employing to assist in identifying future attacks that are still in the planning phase.

4. Deny – Prepare for active shooter attacks through the use of active shooter training. This training should be provided to all officers and select occupations within the community. These occupations could include mall security personnel, teachers, university faculty and critical infrastructure personnel.

Additionally, all officers should be equipped to deal with an active shooter situation.

Although there has been some contention with the militarization of law enforcement in recent years, this equipment is essential to bringing these types of situations to a quick end.

Fund and encourage departments to attend classes such as the one provided by New Mexico Institute of Mining and Technology that educates first responders about energetic materials and other IED familiarization information. These classes are free for first responders and are funded by Department of Homeland Security (DHS) grants.



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